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Because of their interest in naturalism and socialism, critics often overlook the major intellectual conflict in Jack London's work: the paradox of individualism. London regards society as affecting the individual in two ways: it either promotes individuality or it demands a conformity that undermines individualism. When society fails Buck in "The Call of the Wild," he is driven to self-reliance and forced to become an individual, whereas White Fang is punished for exercising his individuality. In "The Sea Wolf," London develops these two extremes of social influence in the socially-isolated Larson and the socially-conforming Van Weyden. London favors Van Weyden, who ultimately realizes his identity as an individual and applies his abilities to improve society while Larson remains aloof and ineffectual throughout the story. London criticizes the destructive nature of this dualistic society in "Martin Eden" and shows Martin's frustration at a society that glorifies great individuals of history and literature but simultaneously ostracizes living nonconformists. Martin's suicide symbolizes London's paradoxical and inconclusive appraisal of the individual in and against society. (MP)

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JACK LONDON: THE PARADOX OF INDIVIDUALISM

Paul Deane

Their interest in Jack London's naturalism and socialism has led critics and students to overlook the major intellectual conflict in London's work: the paradox of individualism. The conclusions from book to book and within books are not consistent, for London himself was never consistent, but in the very inconsistency, London revealed more about himself than he was aware.

Call of the Wild presents the situation of a dog "socialized" into an individual, apart from society and eventually antagonistic to it. The force of society causes the development of the individual, even though Buck, in the process, is turned against society. A comfortable, upper-middle class dog with implicit faith in the superiority of man's wisdom to his own, and reliant upon man rather than himself, Buck submits to his original kidnaping, though he dislikes being tied. He is, as London says, "an unduly civilized dog." The word "unduly" implies error, for civilization fails Buck over and over. He is beaten, whipped, and starved by those to whom he has transferred his allegiance and therewith his individuality. He has come to undervalue himself.

Yet Buck is neither weak nor stupid. "He learned quickly" how to avoid trouble, how to put himself in the best position. His basic nature, swamped, absorbed into society, and effectually negated, reasserts itself. "Instincts long dead came alive again." Like Humphrey Van Weyden in *The Sea Wolf*, "his development was rapid." London's choice of word often indicates his sympathy, for though Buck is regressing to a less civilized state, he is also developing as a being distinct from others, sure of himself, confident of his own ability. Since the total impression of Buck is admirable, London here seems allied with the person, or dog, who develops and depends upon himself. Buck's alter-ego, White Fang, does not come off so well.

But Buck's growing assertion of his individuality is not without qualities disturbing to his environment. The leader of the dogteam, Spitz, is also an individualist, who maintains team solidarity by his superior power. Subtly Buck undermines Spitz's authority, but he also destroys the team's ability to work together as a unit. His right to do this is questionable. Spitz exists

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solely for himself, though by doing so, he is able to keep society together. When Buck overwhelms him, we accept his action because he is fighting for his own right, something beyond the immediate law.

John Thornton is the last link between society and Buck. The dog feels "genuine, passionate love . . . for the first time." He worships Thornton, who, through his respect for Buck and for Buck's freedom, rekindles somewhat the animal's faith in man. The influence of the primitive, however, is too much for the great dog: "He was older than the days he had seen and the breaths he had drawn. He linked the past with the present, and the eternity behind him throbbed through him in a mighty rhythm . . . this great love . . . seemed to bespeak the soft, civilizing influence," and civilization had too often fallen short. "He knew there was no middle course. He must either master or be mastered." The test is not a fair one, for Thornton dies, leaving Buck to continue his desocialization.

White Fang's story is the reverse of Buck's—a view of the usual course of the civilizing influence. White Fang is a wolf who is made part of society. At the end of the novel he is in the condition in which we first meet Buck: his individuality has been brought under control and made subservient to the demands of society. This bare outline is enough to indicate a change in London's point of view, for while there is a surface similarity, the effect of the two books is not at all the same. In the last view of Buck, he is admirable, true to his nature, respected; for White Fang one feels disappointment; his story is one of degradation.

As Buck heard a call from the past, White Fang, whose mother lived with the Indians, is called by her influence. It may be argued that he is conditioned to accept submission and not altogether to blame, yet he seems to choose his fate. When he sees his mother tied, he feels that "it savored of the trap, of bondage. Freedom to run and roam and lie down at will had been his heritage; and here it was being infringed upon." But when the call of the wild comes to him, he does not respond. There are at least two explicit reasons and an implicit third. White Fang is afraid of man. Gray Beaver, the Indian, beats him for any show of defiance. Like Buck, the wolf learns that a man with a club is to be obeyed. The second reason is responsible for his fear. At almost any time White Fang could have returned to the forest. He tries once, but "he arose and trotted fornlornly back to camp . . . pausing to sit down and whimper and listen to the call." He has taken the easy way, and herein lies his condemnation. "White Fang lay at Gray Beaver's feet, gazing at the fire that warmed him, blinking and dozing, secure . . . it was the placing of his destiny in another's hands, a shifting of the re-

sponsibility of existence. This in itself was compensaton, for it is easier to lean upon another than to stand alone."

What are the results of placing one's fate elsewhere than upon himself? When the Indians break camp, White Fang makes a break for freedom. But his "bondage [and the word is significant, because at no time had White Fang not been at liberty to leave] had softened him. Irresponsibility had weakened him. A panic seized him and he ran madly toward the village." When he had been an individual, he had been strong, self-reliant. Now "he knew an overpowering desire for the protection and companionship of man."

But as in *Call of the Wild* the argument for individualism does not go unchallenged. Among the other dogs White Fang is essentially alone. Within the limits of man-made society he develops his own qualities. "He could not endure the touch of another body. He must always be free, on his own legs, touching no living thing." Like Buck he rises to mastery of the other animals, but unlike Buck, who acted with the right, White Fang is wrong. He "knew the law well: to oppress the weak and obey the strong. He ate his share of the meat as rapidly as he could. And then woe the dog that had not yet finished." "He compelled them to an unremitting respect for him." "He was a monstrous tyrant. He oppressed the weak with a vengeance." Such action is that of the dictator, the ultimate individual. At this point individualism breaks down and ceases to be admirable.

What of the action of the other dogs? Because White Fang stands alone, because he is a wolf and consequently different from them, they attack him at every opportunity. "He was the wild, the unknown, the terrible, the ever-menacing." Society is quick to suppress and punish departures from the norms it sets up.

The Sea Wolf presents the points of view of both *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* in such a complete balance that the result is almost a synthesis of their themes. External comparison is inadequate, for only in Humphrey Van Weyden is there anything like White Fang or Buck. Van Weyden, through association with a less civilized society, regresses to a more primitive state, though he does not go so far as Buck. London's most complete individual, Wolf Larsen, differs only in physical ability at the end of the book from the way he is shown at the beginning.

Like White Fang, Larsen is isolated by his individuality from the rest of the crew (society). But the picture is a more penetrating view of what complete independence means. "He is certainly an individual of the most pronounced type," Van Weyden says, "but he is very lonely. There is no congeniality between him and the rest of the men aboard ship." Later he adds, "The

loneliness of the man is slowly being borne in upon me. There is not a man aboard but hates and fears him, nor is there a man whom he does not despise." The book invites comparison with *Moby Dick* and Wolf Larsen with Ahab. In Larsen one is conscious of "a tremendous and excessive mental or spiritual strength that lay behind, sleeping in the depths of his being." Like Ahab, he has a fundamental lack: in Ahab the lack is represented by his ivory leg and his scar; in Larsen, by his frequent debilitating headaches. Like Ahab, too, "he was daring destiny, and he was unafraid."

Larsen and Ahab are completely independent persons, self-involved and society-excluded. As owner of the *Ghost* Larsen has a responsibility toward his crew, yet the ship and all her hands exist solely for the whim of the captain. Like White Fang he rules by strength, "a strength we are wont to associate with things primitive . . . a strength savage, ferocious, alive in itself." His strength and individualism go hand in hand. He is the ultimate source of justice because he is strong and depends on no one; he allows no one to interpret justice for him. "Might is right and that is all there is to it," he says. "Weakness is wrong . . . it is good for oneself to be strong and evil for oneself to be weak." The basic question remains: does he have the right to act as he does? Can any great work in any field be produced except by a person who has dared to go beyond the safety of society's limits and sanctions? Larsen and Ahab both establish a totalitarian context in which all other rights are submerged and made inferior to theirs. When Larsen and Van Weyden discuss *Paradise Lost*, the Captain champions the cause of Lucifer: "Lucifer was a free spirit. To serve was to suffocate. He preferred suffering in freedom to serving in servility. He did not care to serve God. He cared to serve nothing. He stood on his own legs. He was an individual."

Larsen is heroic in his way also, for he does fear nothing. Confident of his own abilities, he depends on them, and he is secure in them. But what of Humphrey Van Weyden? He is a society poet, existing in and for society, without the qualifications of a true artist, those of independence upon himself and his abilities to understand and face life. When his ferry is sunk, he says, "I was alone, floating in the midst of a grey primordial vastness, I confess a madness seized me, that I shrieked aloud as the women had done, and beat the water with my numb hands." He is afraid to be alone, for having never been so, he has had no chance to test his abilities; he does not know what he is, what he is capable of. Yet of the two men, Van Weyden is the more socially acceptable and desirable. The contest between him and Larsen would seem to be an unfair one, and from the physi-

cal point of view it is. But London gives the two men approximately equal intellects. If Larsen's is the more daring and adventuresome, Van Weyden's is the better disciplined. This is his one advantage and the thing that allows him to triumph over the Captain, though he never defeats him.

In the presence of brutality and a more basic form of existence, Van Weyden regresses, although, at the same time, like Buck, he grows. He is given a chance to use his body and to develop an aspect of life different from the intellectual. Here he has another advantage over Larsen, for while the mind of both men remain essentially as capable for most of the book, Van Weyden is growing stronger physically as Larsen is being weakened by paresis. Moreover, physical development opens an area to Van Weyden that had always been apparent to Larsen, and because the writer is intelligent, he can appreciate what it has to offer. Just as Ishmael grows as a result of his experience aboard the *Pequod,* Van Weyden grows in understanding primarily through association with an individual. "While my faith in human life still survived Wolf Larsen's destructive criticism, he had nevertheless been the cause of change in minor matters. He had opened up for me the world of the real . . . from which I had always shrunk. I learned to look more closely at life as it was lived . . . and to recognize that there were such things as facts in the world, to emerge from the realm of mind and ideas." He has left the ways of thinking which his class consider acceptable and right. He is able to think for himself, and his "wild desire to vindicate [himself] in Wolf Larsen's eyes" is accomplished in the last melodramatic chapters after the *Ghost* has been wrecked and Larsen incapacitated. His rise is more than a physical one. His regression has not taken him so far into the purely animalistic as Larsen has gone, and he is able to retain enough of his former sensitivity to appreciate the value of his experience. His spiritual and intellectual change enables him to surpass Larsen, for the poet keeps, as he says, the faith in human life that Larsen lacked. He is able to go on to a realization of the true function of the individual and apply his discoveries and abilities for the use of society.

Although London's sympathy is with Larsen in the sense of his magnificent physique, it is clear that sheer strength is not enough; the individual's powers must be properly applied. Satan is the most completely developed character in *Paradise Lost,* but he does not triumph in that poem.

Martin Eden chronicles on the intellectual level, as *White Fang* did on the physical, the growth of a primitive, a giant in size, strength, and endurance, into a giant intellectually. But *Martin Eden* goes beyond the story of the wolf and indicates

what happens when Martin continues to grow until he is as far beyond society as he was when he was ignorant.

Love for Ruth Morse, a desire to be worthy of her, to understand the things that she and her class take for granted, prompt him to study. "He was enobled by the loftiness of thought and beauty he found in the books. This led him to believe . . . that, up and above him, in society . . . all men and women thought these thoughts and lived them." He finds, perhaps inevitably, that they do not. He finds, indeed, that society's chief value is the financial return that education can produce; when he begins to write, Ruth and her family continually ask him when his writing will be successful, when he will settle down to "normal," in short, when his education will begin to pay off.

As Martin turned his back on his own class and alienated himself from it, eventually his desire to discover truth and to remain true to himself alienates him from the class he sought to enter. Eventually he goes beyond all classes and faces the loneliness of individual man, the loneliness that Van Weyden indicated in Wolf Larsen. "He was disappointed in it all. He had developed into an alien. He had exiled himself." As a writer he finds that society, which glorifies the great individuals of literature and history, wants no part of an author who does not fit the pattern of comfortable social ideals. In the very class which he feels should understand individuality, he finds "narrow little formulas, herd creatures, flocking together and patterning their lives by one another's opinions, failing of being individuals."

In his search for knowledge, Martin is led to attend some Socialist meetings. Although he is impressed by the amount of genuine scholarship he finds, he is too much of an individual to subscribe to an ideology that deemphasizes the value of each person. "As for myself, I am an individualist. I believe the race is to the swift, the battle to the strong. Individualism is the hereditary and eternal foe of socialism."

Yet despite his exaltation of the individual, despite his condemnation of society's sheep-like attitude, London causes Martin, who is not a sheep, to commit suicide. Unable to adjust to a world which has disappointed him, and unable to return to the class from which he originally came, completely isolated, Martin drowns himself. As in the previous books, there is a balance of attitudes. London's appraisal of the status of the individual in and against society allows no general conclusion and the paradox remains. Perhaps the balance speaks for itself.